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Northwest  
**THEATRE**  
REVIEW

Volume 3

1995

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## NORTHWEST THEATRE REVIEW

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## Beyond the Stage: Reflections on Street Theatre in India

LOU FURMAN

Street Theatre is an extremely effective form of communication in countries with low literacy rates. The art form reaches out to the population and requires minimal technical support: no sets, no lights, and no stage. In fact, these technical machinations of proscenium theatre are obstacles in performance. I focused on this genre of theatre during my recent sabbatical year in India.

I began my journey in Bombay near the end of the Monsoon season. Because of the rains, street theatre activity was minimal. But I was able to gain background information. Many of my first contacts were mainstream theatre people working in a proscenium setting who had little respect for street theatre. (Proscenium theatre in India came only with the British occupation of the country. Two hundred years of oppression left its impact on all aspects of Indian life. Western theatrical practice is one of the more visible artifacts.) This negative exposure was helpful as my reading in the United States presented only a positive perspective of street theatre activists.

One of the artists to whom I spoke, Vijay Tendulkar, offered several insights. Tendulkar is one of the leading playwrights in India. His works have been translated into a number of Indian languages (of which 14 official languages are recognized by the government and 26 languages are spoken by a least one million or more people). Most interestingly to me, he maintained that social/political theatre (the form his own plays take) is not effective because "Whatever you do for adults, you cannot change them basically." He believes that street theatre can be used to give people information, but cannot make them act on issues. Street theatre is merely advertising in action. If people want help with their drug problem, a street theatre group might be able to tell them how to get that help. But the performance will not convince the addict that help is necessary. Tendulkar maintained that only theatre intended for viewing by youth is effective in changing audience attitudes, because the young are

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not close minded to change. (Theatre for young audiences is a minor, but fast growing movement in India.)

Street theatre groups may be composed of actors (or aspiring actors), but most likely the performers will be social workers, political activists, office workers or village laborers. Regardless of the composition of the group, street theatre troupes fall into four categories: 1) government sponsored groups that try to encourage participation in specific programs of the government; 2) cultural groups that are associated with Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and use theatre to deliver the NGO position; 3) political groups that are often associated with a particular political party and seek to change society through a political process; and 4) independent groups that tend to follow the line of a strong director.

### Government Sponsored Groups

In a country that has a literacy rate of 48%, the most effective way to make people aware of a government policy is through theatre. Currently, the push of the government is to increase literacy. The attitude of the government and many of those involved in the program seems to be that all inequalities of Indian society will be resolved if the lower caste and rural populations acquire reading skills. While that scenario is doubtful, any movement in the direction of mass education must be considered welcome at this time in the country's history.

The "Total Literacy Campaign" was developed by the central government and is implemented at state levels. My first contact with street theatre groups presenting plays about literacy was in Pali, a medium size city in Rajasthan. The state government brought together a number of village groups interested in communicating the importance of literacy in their local region. These were not theatre people, but laborers, farmers, drivers and teachers. Few of them were women. Women are "too busy" to participate in such activities. Tradition also may have kept women from participating, because men play all the roles in Rajasthani folk forms.

The goal of the state trainers was to establish theatre groups in every region of the state. None of the state trainers had theatre backgrounds, however. One leader in Pali did have a theatre degree from one of a handful of universities in the country that offer theatre. His directing skills were minimal. The plays, themselves, were intended to make people aware that they should want to become literate in order to take control of their lives. The scripts were superficial and focused on events that put people at the mercy of others when they are unable to read. In Pali, I saw the work of one group whose energy and authenticity made me believe them to be better performers than the professionals I had seen on the Bombay stage. Between my poor Hindi and their mediocre English, we were able to communicate. I asked why they were involved in this work. At first they misconstrued the question and replied that they wanted their villagers to value reading skills. But eventually, they understood I was

interested in their motivation for being a part of the program; the response: "To serve India."

I was invited to their village and I went; the first foreigner ever to visit. I spent the days being taken from one family to another and the nights with the performing group. The government supplied one jeep to contribute to the effort. On some evenings, 18 of us with tabla and harmonium would fit into the niches of the jeep and hang off the side. We would eat dinner in whatever village we had performed in last and return home around 1 a.m. I say, "we performed," because I was taught one of the songs in the show and became an honorary member of the company. By 6 a.m. the men would be back to work and I would start my tour of families who were eager to meet the American.

The success of the performances cannot be determined. In some cases, the audiences were very small. At one site nothing had been prepared and after going through the village singing to dark houses to attract attention for the performance (electricity was out at the time), we gave up and went to a second site. Here we were well received and performed for about 375 people.

Villagers who viewed the performances may have been motivated to improve their lives by becoming literate. But the reality is that many of these people had already accepted the notion that reading was valuable. The problem is that their choice was often either to take time to learn the written word or to do the work necessary for daily survival. The latter usually won out.

The Total Literacy Campaign does have an ancillary benefit, however. It helps to maintain the cultural integrity of the community. In effect, it supports the arts through the performing groups as much as it aids the literacy campaign.

### NGO Cultural Groups

Non-governmental organizations also make extensive use of theatre. NGOs are similar to charities in the United States. The value of their work can sometimes be measured by determining who underwrites their activities and how much of their funding goes to the activities and how much to administrative costs. The additional frame of reference in India is whether the funding is foreign. Foreign funded NGOs are immediately suspect.

Approximately 70,000 NGOs are registered with the government of India. Of this number some 20,000-30,000 are active or are involved in a long term project (i.e., not limited by a year of funding or short term goals). About 10% of the NGOs use the performance medium to disseminate their message to their constituents. In other words, India can claim 2,000-3,000 cultural groups active in theatre and music at any given time.

My initial experience with one such group was in the first month of my journey to India. The NGO was Asha Kendra, "Hope Center." It is based in a village of approximately 5,000 people. In addition, it serves some 20,000 inhabitants of nearby villages. I stayed only 3 days in the village and saw only one performance by the cultural group. This was a puppet play for school children about the value of seeing a real physician rather than paying attention to the fakery of village tricksters who want only to take your money. However, this same cultural group performs for adult audiences as well on subjects as varied as woman's issues and tribal culture. One song they were working on during my stay included the lines: "We are tribes so we have no home. The laws of our country torture us."

I discovered early on that the cultural groups loved to sing, and usually I was asked to offer some song as we journeyed to a playing site or relaxed during a rehearsal break. The Asha Kendra group was the first to ask me to contribute a song to the proceedings, and I found that I had limited knowledge of the kind of folk songs with which they would identify. My first rendition in India (bouncing in the back of a truck with ten other bodies) was the Hebrew folk song, "Hava Nagila." It was well received. Later I found a song that was very much favored among the lower class groups, "Sixteen Tons."

One NGO, the "Stree Mukti Sanghatana" ("Women's Liberation Movement") developed a play entitled, "The Girl is Born." Written by the director of the NGO, Joyti Mhapsekar, the play has performed for 2,000,000 people—all within the state of Maharashtra. The theme of the play can be drawn from these lines from the final song of the play:

Children of nature  
Divided by Man  
Shackled by the system  
Let us join hands  
To destroy it and to realize  
The dream of equality  
Between woman and man  
Between man and woman

The people who perform the play are women who are members of the NGO. I asked Joyti if she could measure the success of the play. She thought not. But as we continued our conversation she told me of the women who have left abusive situations because of seeing the play and even some who had joined the organization and became leaders in the work. I would come to learn that anecdotal assessment is the best I can do in a country in which statistics are hard to come by and when available are of questionable accuracy.

I ventured another attempt at statistical analysis later in my travels, when I spent several days in rural India with a conglomerate of NGOs spawned from the Indian Rural Reconstruction Movement. The leader of this group, G. N. Reddi, believes that the work of the rural reconstruction movement cannot expand vertically if it is to maintain a grass roots'

strategy. In other words, instead of a hierarchy with a central organization and various local components, the IRRM has developed spin-offs of independent groups. Once someone has been trained as a leader (after four or five years of time), he is sent out of the program to form his own NGO. In this way, some twenty-two spin-offs of the original program have developed in this one district of southern Andhra Pradesh.

My Western statistical mind wondered if the NGOs had numerical support for their contention that the districts' standard of living had benefited by the high number of outside organizations operating in the region. I asked if they could compare improvement in life style between their district and the neighboring district. No numbers were available. No studies had been conducted, and I had the feeling that no one cared strongly either.

At monthly meetings of one of these NGOs, "P.O.O.R." ("People-Oriented Organization for Reconstruction"—acronyms are a Western inheritance highly valued in India), the various elements of the NGO come together: "Women's Oriented Program," "Education and Culture," "Community Organization," "Mining Area Program," and "Watershed Program." Only six women were present out of 30 members. I was told that women are "ignorant" and do not have sufficient education at this time to be fully represented. The idea is that more women will become members as educational opportunities in villages increase for them.

The NGO works with 40 villages. I was not sure whether to believe the statistic considering the scope of their programs and the few people in leader responsible positions. However, I was to learn that 40 villages are not a large number to handle because of the clustering of the villages. It is not unusual, for example, that five or six villages be within a few kilometers of each other.

P.O.O.R. is very proud of their cultural group. I observed a rehearsal for a play called "Our Life" in a village of about 20 people. Afterwards we walked about a kilometer on a moonless night over a rocky path to the next village (one of several in this cluster) where the performance itself was held. The play attracted almost all the village population of around 120 people. "Our Life" is meant to make the audience members reflect on their position in society. The plot revolves around a younger son who will not respect the landowner. In the end, the father kills himself and the police arrest the sons. The plot is not important. It is a series of vignettes that demonstrate the power of the landowner.

The interesting point about the play to me is its political message: the oppressed versus the oppressors. P.O.O.R.'s primary activities as outlined previously are not political in nature, and yet the play's focus is on local authorities and by implication the established government. I learned early on that very little in India is apolitical.

### Political Activists

A desire to communicate political statements to a largely illiterate population fostered the growth of the street theatre movement in India. The immediacy of the form and the inherent dangers in performing are respected even by mainstream proscenium theatre practitioners. I was told by Rustom Barucha, a scholar from Calcutta, that the street theatre performers can find themselves vulnerable to physical harm. "It's not like doing Brecht in proscenium," he said.

Perhaps the most famous of these political activist groups is Jana Natya Manch ("People's Theatre") or JANAM. The fame from within and outside the country is centered on the group's former leader, Safdar Hashmi. He is known within the country as an artist who brought street theatre to a higher form of aesthetic expression. His international reputation may be said to be based, unfortunately, on the way he met his death rather than on how he lived his life. Hashmi was beaten to death by a group of goondas (thugs) during a JANAM performance. Common knowledge holds that the goondas were agents of the ruling Congress Party of India. JANAM is a political organization sympathetic to the Communist Party of India (Marxist faction), but not formally associated with the Party. Mala Hashmi, Safdar's wife, has taken over the reigns of the group and become the main convener. She was a street theatre activist in her own right before becoming a member of JANAM and now is guiding the group with her own vision.

Mala explained to me that there are three types of people who come to JANAM. The first are those who are serious about theatre, and who think that joining the company will be a stepping stone to video, film, or commercial theatre. The second group of people are those who have some general interest in social works. A few of these people have talent, others do not. The third type of person is a small but constant core group of people committed to theatre and social change. Only those dedicated to making a difference in society and have the skills to express it through theatre stay with the group, because it is very hard to juggle domestic and working lives. Indeed, it is difficult enough simply to remain employed in India.

Mala's discussion of theatre skills demands elaboration. Very few people in any area of Indian theatre have what Westerners would call training in the art. Only one comprehensive school of drama is recognized in the country, the National School of Drama. In total, I learned of only 2 others that call themselves theatre training programs at any level. Very few universities offer any form of training either. Less than a handful of schools in the country have theatre programs and not all of those include production work. The street theatre activists evolve their skills through experience. Often those skills are not sufficiently proficient to project strong images for the audience. Many groups, such as, Jana Natya Manch, are aware of these short comings in training and attempt to make

up for that lack by inviting outside guests to lead workshops. Sometimes the guests are international, such as myself (or the famous, such as Schechner, Brook or Grotowski—India is a popular place for a number of theatre artists). However, training for the most part is "guru based," passed on from the experienced in the company to the newcomers.

The commitment of the performers often makes up for the lack of formal training. Soman is an older actor who has been with JANAM for 2 years. He is dedicated, because he feels he is doing some little part to make a change in the world. According to Soman, street theatre is not limited by the quality of the theatre or the effectiveness of the genre. To him, the problem is simple: too few groups are doing "this kind of work," and they cannot reach all the people who must hear the message.

Soman and the other members of JANAM earn their living through means other than theatre. Street theatre activists are not professional theatre artists as much as they are social and political activists. Mala herself is an elementary school teacher (and a good one, too). Brijesh is a doctor. All work a full day then come to rehearsal evenings and weekends. Other performers are students. In fact, the majority of street theatre performers in India are students. When these people reach an age when they have family responsibilities or need to support their parents, they tend to drop out—usually just at a time when they have begun to develop some performance skills.

JANAM's rival in Delhi is Nishant ("End of Night," i.e., "Dawn"). I use the term, rival, because the sense I have of many of the groups in India is that they look upon each other as siblings—a mixture of love and respect tempered by a large dose of jealousy toward each other. The director of this group is Shamsul Islam. The son of a wealthy industrialist, Islam was thrown out of his house for his political beliefs when he was 16 years old. Today, he refuses to "sell out" (in his words) to the establishment. He will not take money from government agencies, foreign organizations, or any outside sources other than donations for performances from host organizations or audience members. Islam is employed by the government as a professor of Political Science at Delhi University. A professor's responsibilities in India are significantly less demanding than his counterpart in the United States. Islam, for example, canceled more (many more) than one class during my time with him in Delhi, so that he could attend to the business of his theatre group. I suggested to him that the government was indeed underwriting his street theatre activities in this way (he is paid his full salary while taking leave to perform); Islam did not see the connection.

Unlike JANAM, Nishant is directly associated with a political party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist/Leninist faction). All members of Nishant are Party members. Most of them are students whom Islam recruited from his classes. They are indoctrinated as Party members and participate in Nishant to communicate the Party's ideas to the public. During the electioneering, performers might be called upon to pass out



Shamsul Islam's group, "Nishant," shows the U.S. bullying the Indian Government during an election play in Delhi. The Hindi on the costume reads: "America."

political literature or march in rallies as well as perform in street plays. During the election campaign in which I participated, Islam argued with Party leaders that Nishant was not being well used. His troupe should be used to perform not pass out flyers. He was, however, overruled by the Party hierarchy.

Mention of the "Party" and Marxism may strike fear into the hearts of Americans—or at least some feelings of discomfort. But the Communist Party in India (and I suspect in many third world countries) is simply an expression of opposition against an oppressive establishment. When I asked a member of a street theatre group what it meant to be a "Marxist," she told me that it was someone who "was for the people and gender equality."

Whatever disagreements with the Party, Islam remained convinced that theatre cannot replace political activism. Street theatre activity, according to Islam, is most effective when it is part of a comprehensive program; a theme that I have heard a number of times by now.

Nishant and Jana Natya Manch have much in common (although I suspect they would prefer to focus on what distinguishes them). For example, during the electioneering, both groups' plays centered on the evil IMF (International Money Fund) and the World Bank; in both cases, the actor representing the IMF dressed in U.S. colors and an Uncle Sam hat; in both plays, Prime Minister Rao of the Congress Party and L.K. Advani, president of the Bharatiya Janata Party—a prominent opposition party—were shown as puppets and servants of the American dressed character.

I had long conversations with Islam and Mala questioning their representation of the "Great American Bully." (We had sufficient time for many talks as I lived with both during my stay in Delhi. They are both nurturing people who, to me, have much in common—but I know neither would give credence to such a view.) My argument was that India is a democracy (the world's largest), and the people have the power to vote for a government that is not a "puppet" to foreign interests. Blaming the U.S. for the problems of India gives an appearance to me that the people of India have no control of their own situation. "You have to show the people how to change their government, not mine," I would assert.

Nishant and JANAM performances were held in the slum areas of Delhi; neighborhoods that would be most likely to accept the Communist Party message and where the Party had found candidates to run for office. Performances took place wherever enough room could be found for the actors and audience without disrupting traffic to a great extent. (People, motorcycles, cows and busses make regular appearances on street theatre "stages.") In one instance, local leaders had arranged for JANAM to perform in front of a mosque. As we waited for an audience to develop, I looked around at the goats walking the rubble on a nearby wall



and watched the Moslems entering their sanctuary. Just as the play was about to begin, the call for prayers wailed from the mosque. Clearly the conflict between theatre and religion was too great and the performance was canceled.

When not immersed in political issues, Nishant and JANAM develop a repertoire of plays that deal with women's issues, caste prejudice and communalism. *Arise, Awake, My Women* is an episodic play by Nishant that shows some of the situations a modern woman faces in India when she attempts to get a job or attend a university. At one point, a character points out that these attitudes of society are not anti-social or immoral, because Indian religions and cultures support the lower position of women. Islam uses quotes from the Koran, the Bible and the Vedas to make his point. Most street theatre groups include a "woman's play" in their repertoire. The issues may include dowry deaths (the murder of a wife—usually by burning—because her dowry was insufficient and the husband seeks a new source of revenue), physical abuse (often the result of alcoholic rampages by husbands), and society's lack of acceptance of girl babies (which sometimes ends with the murder of female children by starvation, drowning or abortion).

"Communalism," another stock piece for street theatre activists, does not mean a sense of community as it might mean in the West. In India, "communalism" refers to the conflict between Moslem and Hindu communities. Thousands have lost their lives in riots of recent years that were ignited by the destruction of a mosque in the town of Ayodhya. Tradition has it that the mosque was built on a Hindu holy site (a former temple and the birthplace of a very popular Hindu God, Ram).

A strength of the street theatre form is that it can present such issues of deep controversy to a wide range of people. Crowds unknowingly become audience; slowly people are exposed to issues and beliefs with which they may be unfamiliar or to which they may be opposed. Proscenium theatre, on the other hand, rarely surprises. It performs for audiences that have paid good money to agree with what is presented. This point was brought home to me when Islam decided that Nishant would perform their piece on the communal issue after one of their election propaganda pieces. We were in an "urban village" setting populated mostly by Muslims. Islam wanted the audience to see his play, because it demonstrated the ludicrous rationale of both Hindu and Muslim radicals.

Every street theatre group with which I came into contact had at least one play that dealt with the communal issue. In fact, a street theatre festival in Bombay was dedicated to the issue. At the end of the rainy season, 16 groups came together to present an entire day of performances dedicated to encourage harmony between the Hindus and Muslims. Interestingly, many of these groups were not legitimate street theatre activists, but chose to use the form as a means of expressing their support for the anti-communal movement. The participants ranged from established street theatre groups to elementary school classes under the

authoritative directing of their teacher. The day's activities did demonstrate that street theatre is accepted as a theatre genre and a way to communicate directly to the people. This notion was reinforced as I watched another festival of street theatre—a competition in New Delhi among university street theatre groups. Street theatre is actually a subject in a few university curricula. Mala teaches a course at a school in Delhi under the mass communication banner. Several groups operate within the jurisdiction of and often with the imprimatur of university authorities. The presentations of the university theatre groups, however, were no more sophisticated than the productions I saw in Bombay.

### Independent Groups

The quality of street theatre groups varied from one part of the country to another. The many independent groups are as strong as their leader/directors. Several very powerfully willed leaders have used the form to further their own political and social agendas. Perhaps one of the most influential of these leaders is Prasanna who now lives in Hegoddu, a small village in South India.

Prasanna passed out of (i.e., graduated from) the National School of Drama—arguably the only fully funded, comprehensive school of drama in the country. He came to Bangalore to begin a theatre group that would address social issues. This was pre-Emergency 1975-1976. (The "Emergency" refers to a time that Indira Gandhi took on dictatorial powers to suppress her opposition.) The group he created, Samudaya, was party affiliated, in this case CPI (M), but not party dictated. His theatre in Bangalore grew to an organization that had some 40 units active in the state of Karnataka. These were franchises held together by a common philosophy and written guidelines. Much of the funding for the unit's activities comes from loans by individual members and is repaid to them when a production receives money for performance or from other sources. Samudaya is an example of what has happened to a number of street theatre/political action groups in India. Either its leadership has passed and the group has pulled back to less dynamic goals or the leadership has fallen into a rut of developing non-risk productions that allow the group to be self-sustaining. In the case of Samudaya, it would appear that both have happened.

Prasanna has left the company and Samudaya has settled on a form that does socially relevant, but not political challenging, proscenium theatre. Members are more interested in performance than ideology. Gundanna (a major organizer of Samudaya) says that young people are not interested in the street theatre, and it is hard to maintain a group focused on this form. Again, many of the actors are students and few are women—as is true with almost all groups I encountered. (One reason for the lack of women in Samudaya is that it is hard for the women to get back and forth from rehearsal at nights. It can be very dangerous for women in the streets of India.)

The main "rival" of Samudaya in South India is a group called Chitra, led by A.S. Murthi. This rivalry focuses on some petty issues—such as, which group first introduced street theatre in the South—and some significant issues—such as, is money being funneled off by one of the groups to support other than theatre activities. Trying to learn the truth of the issue is not an easy task. (I spent almost as much time sorting claims of rival groups as I did attending to their production work. Ask two Indians an opinion and you may get three perceptions.) I spent a good deal of time with Chitra (and gave a workshop to the Sunday Drama School—the proscenium component of Chitra and its training ground for proscenium and street theatre company members). Part of their repertoire includes performances on women's issues, AIDS, and a new piece on the government bureaucracy. I was able to translate accurately the play dealing with the unfair struggle of women although I had no knowledge of the language, Kannada. Perhaps, my skill in interpretation was because I had now been in India seven months and had seen many of these plays, but the message was clear to me and to the audience as well. (The crowd of about 400 people saw the play, approximately 10% of the village.) The play about AIDS, on the other hand, was very talky, and I had difficulty following the plot. The last piece I saw performed had been explained to me when I saw it earlier during rehearsals. The story is that two messengers of the god of Dead come to take away the soul of a



A village in South India turns out to see A. S. Murthi's group, Chitra, in a play about women's issues.

recently departed man. However, they cannot find him. In time, they discover the soul going through his government files. He pleads with the servants of the god to give him more time to straighten out his files otherwise his family will not get the money they deserve and will starve. You do not have to be Indian to appreciate the thrust of this piece. The constant struggle against bureaucratic bungling would cause a substantial rise in the blood pressure of most Westerners. Murthi says his street theatre began as a protest group. But he has since adjusted his objectives. Now the troupe deals with day to day problems.

Two street theatre leaders for whom I have a very warm place in my heart are Badal Sircar and Pranab Chatterjee, both of Calcutta. (After my descriptions of time spent with Mala Hashmi and Shamsul Islam, you have probably realized that I have a "very warm place in my heart" for many of the people I met in India, especially the theatre activists.) I was told that Calcutta is polluted and filled with slums. Everyone in India said so. Also I had been told that Calcutta is where I had to go to see political theatre. Everyone I met in India said so. But communications in India are less than effective, and many people know about other parts of India by rumor alone. Calcutta may have a bad reputation for filth and slums (fostered in the West by images of Mother Teresa and the film, "City of Joy"), however, my impression is that Delhi has far more air pollution and Bombay is far more slum ridden than Calcutta. I enjoyed the cultural atmosphere of the city, and it became my favorite of the larger municipalities in India. As far as the other "rumors" about Calcutta's political activity, it may have been the center of leftist agitation 17 years ago before the Communist government was elected, but today I found it leaning toward conservatism at all levels, including theatre.

Badal Sircar's name is synonymous with political street theatre throughout India. He is now in his sixties and was the first city planner of Calcutta after independence. He maintained that position for a livelihood while following a career that began with proscenium style theatre and moved to what he would call, the "Third Theatre."

I first met Sircar during a festival of plays of street theatre activists. Most of the groups involved in the festival interact with each other during the year, some even coming together for joint productions. (While the cooperation here is a marked difference from the rivalry witnessed in other regions of India, only the groups of this informal "consortium" under Sircar's guidance relate in this way. The rivalry with other alternative theatre troupes remains strong.) All the participating groups of the festival are within a few hours of Calcutta. The pieces that I saw ran the gamut from typical symbolic propaganda plays to well-developed realistic portrayals.

Sircar wrote a book a number of years ago called *The Third Theatre*. He stated in this theoretic volume that the "first theatre" is the indigenous forms of India; the "second theatre" is the urban proscenium genre, and a "third" form is an alternative theatre: a free theatre—free to express,

free from convention and free of charge. Expense, the cost of the ticket, is the first barrier between theatre and the people, according to Sircar. To this day, free theatre groups perform every Saturday in Cuzon Park in downtown Calcutta. Their expenses are covered by collections made at the end of the play. (This practice is not unusual for street theatre groups; Nishant, JANAM, and others raise money in this fashion.)

I spent much time with the groups associated with the free theatre movement. I accompanied one group, Patahsena ("Soldiers of the Street") to a performance sponsored by the Democratic Youth Movement, the youth group of the CPI (M/L). The play is the story of Dhanua and revolves around the issue of bonded labor. Prior to the performance, I asked one of the company members why he was doing this work. He told me,

We love theatre, first. Then there are things in our society that we find unpleasant. We want to use the theatre to protest this unpleasantness—people unemployment, not enough food, not having minimum standard of living. With the theatre we help them to protest so we can change these unpleasant things, change society.

The group invited me to take a workshop with them (this meant that I was to give the workshop). I accepted, and we arranged a three day session later that week. (I was not the first foreigner to take a workshop with these activists. Peter Brook, for one, has had the privilege.) During the workshop, I suggested that an effective use of drama may be developed after the play is finished; that the performers can absorb the audience in a reflection process that would lead to audience participation in role plays focused on issues revealed by the play. I probed the actors (again, all male) to come up with a real situation that we might use to develop a future project. I was told of a nearby factory that uses indentured workers who are not allowed off the company grounds and must buy from a company store. When an activist tried to make contact with these workers and to make them aware of their situation, he was killed. As we devised a strategy for dealing with the problem through a street theatre venue, I realized that this was not America. I was not playing a game with my theatre activity. The choices we made that day could mean endangering the people with whom I was working.

Pranab Chatterjee's group, Ritwick, is another of the old guard companies. He is part of Calcutta's "Group Theatre" scene. These theatre companies were a part of the opposition theatre when the Congress party was still in control of Bengal, the state in which Calcutta is situated. These groups attacked the establishment in proscenium and street theatre genres. Today the Communist government remains appreciative of their effort and provides grants for many of these theatre group's activities. Of course, now the leftist producers have become part of the establishment and are no longer doing controversial material, but situation comedy, *Death of a Salesman*, and adaptations of *Man of La Mancha*. My relationship with these directors allowed me to question the production choices. The response by several was that they feared the damaging rule of the Congress Party more than the sometimes inept rule of the

Communist Party, i.e., they were willing to support the lesser of two evils and not criticize the Party through the theatre media.

Pranab's group performs proscenium theatre most of the time now. However, during elections—he is associated with CPI (M)—and in times of crisis, he does perform in the streets of Calcutta and nearby villages. He made arrangements for me to see a day of four street theatre performances. The whole day was organized for my benefit. Usually Ritwick would do multiple performances of one play in a single day. However, his performers did four different plays for me to give me a sense of the history of Pranab's group. Also the cost of transportation and food was usually borne by the hosts, those organizations that would invite Ritwick to perform (e.g., the Party). On that day Pranab absorbed the expenses. I was overwhelmed by his generosity. My companion (in whose home I stayed while in Calcutta) was less surprised. I was a guest, I was told. It was to be expected.

One of the scripts performed was set in the time of Rajiv Gandhi in 1989. However, when I compared this play with one of the recent productions, I saw that the content may have changed but the form had not. I discussed this with Pranab. He agreed that his theatre may have had a cognitive effect, but it did not effect the heart. He went on to say that in this way he (and street theatre in Calcutta) had failed. I felt like a lousy guest. I regretted that my comments should cause this remark as Pranab and his group had worked so hard to achieve what success they had gained in their effort to reach out to people. My criticism could have been held for another day.

After my companion and I returned home, he asked my opinion of the day. It seemed to me, I told him, that the older generation of street theatre activists in Calcutta had fought the fight so long that they no longer had the energy or the will or the finances to battle the obstacles that are barriers for performance groups in India. However, I was soon to encounter a younger generation that is taking up the battle.

Probir Guha is the leader of the "Alternative Living Theatre." Probir was a political being before he became a theatre artist. He was a member of the Communist Party of India. After its split, he joined the CPI (M) and then finally became a member of the Naxalite movement, an extremist group with Maoist leanings. His drama experience began when the CPI (M) asked him to develop some political theatre for the elections. When he became disillusioned with political parties, he maintained his interest in drama, because he saw it as the best medium for communicating his ideas. The Naxalite movement collapsed, and he found himself settled in a suburb of Calcutta where he began a theatre group that focused on local issues and experiences (then called the "Living Theatre"). After a series of serendipitous events, Probir found himself in Poland working with Grotowski. He became disillusioned with Grotowski and returned to India; not before making a number of international connections. In part because of his global network and in part because of his knowledge

of particular Indian folk forms, he established a national reputation on the Subcontinent. Meanwhile, according to some, the "Living Theatre" suffered during his many absences. Eventually the group split, Probir forming the A.L.T. The reasons were leadership squabbles, and (more importantly, perhaps) arguments over the distribution of funds from a Ford Foundation grant. (The issue of funding, foreign funding especially, is often at the root of controversies within many Indian organizations—theatre and otherwise.)

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of A.L.T. work is the inclusion of the martial arts as a theatrical form. Several regions in India have centuries old traditions in the martial arts. The physical fierceness of the form appeals to Probir who believes in the use of violence on stage to shock his audiences. He wants to "disturb you in your sleep." He uses the martial arts extensively in production. Often a member of his company will travel to a part of India and stay for several months to receive training in a specific martial arts form. Returning to the group, the member trains others in the art form (all underwritten by the Ford Foundation grant).

The use of the martial arts has resulted in a theatre that takes risks—at least from an artistic perspective—and appears to make their audiences think. One production, *The Wave of Darkness*, focuses on the communal issue. After the performance I saw, audience viewers stayed in the tent (in which the production was performed) to talk amongst themselves and to come back stage and argue points with Probir. Clearly, the play made a point about the Muslim/Hindu conflict.

Probir is not the only street theatre activist in Calcutta that has had intense connections with the outside world. Jana Sanskriti under the guidance of Sanjay Ganguly is establishing itself as the Agosto Boal ("Theatre of Oppression") company of India. Members of the group—including Sanjay—have worked with Boal in Brazil and Paris. Most recently, Boal came to the group's ashram to workshop with the company for a week.

The group's headquarters are a secluded retreat in the midst of rice paddies just north of Calcutta. Jana Sanskriti is somewhat different from other groups that have been discussed. It is independent and yet closely associated with an NGO that acts as an umbrella for the separate political, women's and theatre units. Each group is autonomous, but often they cooperate and coordinate their actions. The members of the performing group are not actors. They are social activists who see the theatre as a means to communicate their message.

Members of Jana Sanskriti theatre live in villages in which sanctioned units of the umbrella NGO are active. The core group of actors come together and develop the plays. They soon return to their community and re-create the script with local performers. In that way, 14 to 16 versions of the play are available at any given time. If the umbrella group wishes to concentrate on a specific social concern, the core group can

develop an appropriate script that is then replicated by the satellite theatre groups and performed across the region simultaneously in support of the issue.

Do the programs really have an effect? Do they make a difference? I asked some of the performers. Yes, answered one woman, Malakshmi. She sees her own life as an example. She had passed out of 10th class, quite an accomplishment for a village girl who usually would be kept at home for work and then married off. Malakshmi had hoped to continue her education, but her family was not supportive, and she was forced to leave school. At this point (she was 16 years old), a women's group came to her village and made her see how she had been repressed. (I am not clear if the women's group was the one associated with Jana Sanskriti umbrella organization.) Next in her development as a social activist, she remembers seeing Jana Sanskriti perform and she asked to join the group. She stays with the drama, she says, because she can see how it makes a difference. First, in her own life because she has grown in confidence. Second, in the lives of the women in the villages. She points out that her place in the company, in and of itself, is a model for other women. (This company was the first I met that had an equal number of male and female performers.) Women in some of the villages are never allowed out of the house, but with the example of Jana Sanskriti in the village, women are becoming part of the audience and even now some women are going on stage. In fact, one village has an all women's performing group.

According to Malakshmi and the other women in the group, the men who are involved in the local groups also have seen another perspective. They do not go home and beat their wives. They are changing the way they treat their women. Some men have even taken written pledges not to demand dowry. Malakshmi is engaged to such a man.

Progress is seen at a community level as well. During an anti-alcohol campaign, the theatre group developed a program that was so effective that on one occasion action was taken against 200 illegal liquor outlets in one of the districts. I saw (in a video tape that was lighted by Sanjay's scooter headlights) gallons of liquor being dumped and burned. Sanjay says this is where the work of the group ends and the community must take action. The activists must help the villagers to take control of their future.

It would be nice to close with such a clear picture of the value and success of street theatre activity. But nothing in India is black or white. Always after you think you understand a subject, another perspective rears its head. I want to present a positive picture as I remember the dreams and aspirations of my friends who give freely of their time and with much effort are trying to change the face of India. But the lack of theatre training for almost all the activists, the immensity of the issues, the huge population that complicates every action in India must color any hope.

Is there a place for street theatre in the U.S.? Can it make a difference here? These questions stick with me. Perhaps a recent opportunity

I have may give me some answers. I am working with young adults from an alternative high school. They want to convey a message that gangs and a certain lifestyle are destructive. The students contend that their lives have been damaged by their actions, and they do not want to see the same happen to others. I thought street theatre might be a better way to get the attention of the intended audience than might "traditional" theatre. My students liked the idea. I am now working on my first street theatre play. I hope it will have an effect on the audience. I know it is having an impact on the participants.

## The Issue of Identity in Steven Dietz' *God's Country* or Why Bring the Aryan Nations to W.S.U.?

TERRY JOHN CONVERSE

To me, the greatest tragic factor in history is man's apparent need to mark the intensity of his reaction to life by joining a band; for a band, to give itself definition, must find a rival, or an enemy.

—Peter Shaffer  
Introduction to  
*The Royal Hunt of the Sun*

Steven Dietz' *God's Country*, which was presented this past spring at Washington State University, is especially disturbing to Northwest audiences, because its subject matter of white supremacy hits very close to home. It literally hit very close to my home when upon returning from dropping off my four year old son at his school, I found an Aryan Nations recruiting flyer on the windshield of my car. The flyer had a picture of African American women and a warning stating, "They are coming by the millions! And they are all pregnant!" At the bottom of the flyer was the question, "Want to live in a all white area?" and a telephone number and post office box number for the Aryan Nations.<sup>1</sup> It was at that very moment that I decided to direct *God's Country*.

Dietz' play dramatizes the fact that despite the multitude of disparate white supremacy groups in the United States, a common thread in the network of bigotry is the Aryan Nations. Both the Aryan Nations and its "Church of Jesus Christ Christian" are run by Richard Butler, a former flight engineer who moved to Idaho from California in 1973. Butler's Church of Jesus Christ Christian is part of the Identity Christianity movement which claims Jesus was an Aryan and that white Anglo-Saxons, rather than Jews, are the chosen people. Believing that racial equality is a sin, Identity Christians preoccupy themselves with preparations for the final battle of Armageddon—a race war in America.<sup>2</sup>

In our production of *God's Country*, not only was Pastor Butler a character in the play, but he was also a member of the audience. With his wife,

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The Washington State University production of *God's Country*.

Betty, and military uniformed fellow Pastors, Carl Franklin and Wayne Jones, he not only attended the play but contributed significantly to the post show discussion of Friday, April 23. Lasting over two-and-a-half hours, the facilitated discussion gave the over-150 audience members who stayed a chance to ask questions of the Aryan Nations leader. The event was historically significant, since this was the very first time that Richard Butler and associates had ever witnessed a production of this play.

### Bringing Butler to W.S.U.

Of the multitude of white radical, still living personages teaming in Dietz' docu-drama, none of them are as pivotal or as notorious as Richard Butler. His fundamental success has been to unite many of the previously sparring supremacy groups into sharing his dream of forming a white Aryan homeland or nation.<sup>3</sup> By taking over the five Northwest states of Washington, Idaho, Oregon, Montana and Wyoming, Butler and followers hope to create their very own "God's Country." In the words of Butler himself, to his very own "kinsmen," he argues:

Though we are of one racial family, we have been divided one against the other; thus our household has fallen. While the Black, Yellow, Brown, and Jew races each have national states for their racial nations (a government of, by, and for their race) all of the national states for the White Race have fallen to the alien.<sup>4</sup>

In yearly congresses, Butler brings together leaders of organizations such as the KKK, Covenant Sword and Arm of the Lord, White Aryan Resistance, Posse Comitatus and Christian Patriots, to name just a few. Strategic planning sessions at these congresses, held each July and typically attended by several hundred people, are largely centered around bringing Butler's territorial dream a little closer to reality. It was the 1983 congress that inspired Robert Mathews, a previous member of the Aryan Nations, to form his own action-oriented splinter group known as The Order. Under the leadership of Robert Mathews, who died in a grotesque shoot-out with the FBI on Whidbey Island, The Order committed a series of crimes which ranged from petty theft to grand robbery, and ultimately The Order "carried out the most successful crime spree in United States History."<sup>5</sup> *God's Country* chronicles the activities of The Order which culminated in the brutal murder of Denver talk-show personality, Alan Berg.

Given the kaleidoscopic barrage of detail and overall complexity of subject matter inherent in the play, I felt that the actors needed an educational foundation that went considerably beyond the traditional rehearsal process. For this reason, a concurrent academic course was offered to the cast and crew, along with any other interested students; the course provided a unique interdisciplinary study of white supremacy movements, incorporating information from the fields of sociology, psychology, literature and drama. Through activities, guest speakers, lectures, and reading, members of the class were challenged to understand the motives of

the various groups and individuals who identify with such organizations. In a time when the dogma of political correctness dominates the campus environment, the course extended the opportunity for students to learn about their own racism and challenge their preconceptions about white separatists.

It was this class that indirectly brought about the attendance of Pastor Butler. In an unsolicited letter to the drama department, Ricky Cooper, director of the National Socialist Vanguard 6 mentioned that he had heard about our upcoming W.S.U. production of *God's Country*, and that he would be letting his "associates in Eastern Washington, Idaho and Western Montana" know about the play, as well as publishing a "report" of the play in the April/June '93 NSV newsletter. Enclosed was also one of his newsletters (July/Sept, 1990) complete with a logo prominently displaying a swastika surrounded by laurel leaves.

In contacting Cooper to provide him with press release information, his enthusiasm about our white supremacy class, prompted me to ask him if he would have any interest in guest lecturing. He agreed, and virtually all of the student journals attest to the fact that his visit to the class was the highlight of the term.<sup>7</sup> Most present were amazed at his mild-mannered demeanor while delivering such beliefs as the "holy-hoax of the holocaust" and the eminent race war—Armageddon. The students were directly exposed to an avowed white supremacist, given the opportunity to ask him questions and try to understand why Ricky Cooper believes as he does.

Cooper's letter was a surprise to us, but not so the presence of Richard Butler. Both the play's Assistant Director, Shawn Shepherd, and I had been invited by Cooper to attend the final day of the annual Hitler Festival (The Youth Conference) on Sunday, April 18. At the festival, after attending his service, we invited him to attend *God's Country*. To our delight, he agreed. While Californian filmmaker and writer, Peter Lake, is described in the play as having "infiltrated the Aryan Nations church,"<sup>8</sup> we discovered that we didn't by any means have to go so far as "infiltrating" to enter the compound, especially with our personal invitation from Cooper.

On separate occasions, both Director Cooper and Pastor Butler attended our production, and significantly contributed to the post performance discussions. To my mind there is little question that they had tremendous impact on both the community and those who were a part of the production. Although there were post-show discussions after each of the seven performances, it was hardly surprising that our most spirited discussions occurred on the two occasions when there was true diversity of opinion in the audience. Politically correct preaching to the converted is hardly ever inspirational, and certainly the best phrased defense for bringing Butler and Cooper to W.S.U. came in the form of personal letter to me from a Lutheran pastor who argued that "The goal of a University is not to present ideas which are safe for students, but to fashion

students who are strong enough to confront ideas, even those which offend." Hopefully such sentiments as these were in the majority, but I was also made aware that there were many who felt that we were generally taking things too far, all of which leads directly to the issues of free speech and identity.

### Freedom of Speech

If you don't exclude the Jews from this Nation, in 200 years your children will curse you!  
—Ben Franklin, 1787

Should Ben Franklin in the above quote have been silenced? How far is too far when it comes to freedom of expression? During the dramatization of Robert Mathews' incineration, the plays' closing inferno is interrupted by the ghostly apparition of Alan Berg, who sounds the thematic alarm for the entire play:

Let it flow. Let people choose to believe what they want. Challenge it in open forums. . . . I think, short of inciting a riot, let people say things they want to say. . . . As ugly as they may be. . . . That to me, is true freedom of speech.<sup>9</sup>

Berg's final plea sums up not only the theme of the play, but the intent of our after show discussions as well. Despite the great deal of excitement generated by the appearance of both Cooper and Butler, there were several members of the University community who were strongly opposed to giving the radical right any voice at all on our campus. With environmental catastrophe surrounding us, why do we need to further pollute our higher learning world with poisons in the form of white supremacy? As surely as toxic residue kills our wildlife, so will the mean spirited sludge of white supremacy kill our spirit! In contacting one of the campus lawyers, I was assured that there were no issues of legality involved in bringing white separatists to either the class room or the theatre, but that I was strongly advised, unofficially, not to do so. My original intent was to have Butler be part of a formal panel discussion composed of various specialists and community figures, but here as well, I was strongly dissuaded from attempting this. When I asked Butler whether or not he minded media coverage, he said he had he "didn't care, either way," but the administration insisted upon keeping everything quiet.

Such advice seems to forget that college campuses have traditionally been committed to fostering an atmosphere of uninhibited free speech; Universities must hold to the notion that the more discussion the better if they wish to continue intellectual debate. White separatists' views are definitely not sensitive to the minorities, but they are still topics, which however dangerous they may be to the school's progressive mission, ought to be addressed, not silenced. Why? Throughout the play, Alan Berg directly addresses this issue to his radio listeners:

. . . everything you have said is a lie, okay? But I think you have a right to advance your lies. I'm still protecting your right to lie, okay?<sup>10</sup>



... it scares me if we do anything to interfere with freedom of expression. It always ends up hurting the minority.<sup>11</sup>

There is a danger. I agree with you. I think that's the danger we exhibit in all free—all rights of free expression, be it columnists who write for newspapers...<sup>12</sup>

Yes, the pen can be mightier than the sword, and yes words can hurt us, but what makes freedom of speech a constitutional right that is so special, is that it offers a vehicle to debate genuinely and examine controversial issues. All universities need to guarantee the right of free discovery to everyone equally, without discriminating against unpopular or dangerous ideas. If our universities are truly to be bastions of intellectualism, they must pass the very demanding test of the First Amendment.

### The Problem of Identity

Theatre, art, literature, cinema, press, posters, and window displays must be cleansed of all manifestations of our rotting world... Public life must be freed from the stifling perfume of our modern eroticism... The right of personal freedom recedes before the duty to preserve the race.

—Adolph Hitler

This issue of free speech, sad to say, came as little surprise. But what was a genuine surprise was the fact that Butler and Cooper, both publicly praised our production of *God's Country* during the after performance discussions.<sup>13</sup> Even though Father Bill Wassmuth, head of the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment, had previously mentioned to me that productions of this play had been generally positively perceived by white nationalists,<sup>14</sup> I was sure that our production, with its directorial intent of satirizing the brutality of bigotry, would be the exception. Ironically, critics of the production, including some of the very ones who argued against the personal appearance of Butler and Cooper, claimed that our attempts at satirizing bigotry was merely a mask for indulging in it. In thinking about this controversy, I have come to the conclusion that the common denominator for all of these reactions is none other than that of identity.

Richard Butler practices what is usually called, Identity Christianity—a theology holding that whites are descendants of the lost tribes of Israel, and that Jews as well as Blacks and other people of color are “mud people” born of Satan. The word *identity* should by no means be taken casually; keep in mind that the Nazi regime worshiped by Butler was, above all else, a cult of identity. Hitler was a genius at providing the German nation with an exaggerated sense of self-respect by creating an image of purity, strength, pride, and superiority. The Nazi atrocities of unbelievable cruelty and destruction exemplified what people will do in the name of identity. To be a German was to be one with God, whereas to be a Jew was to be something less than human. At an international conference on hate, Vaclav Havel made a fascinating observation relating to the psychology of hate in saying that hatred

is a diabolical attribute of the fallen angel: it is a state of the spirit that aspires to be God, that may even think it is God, and is tormented by indications that it is not and cannot be.<sup>15</sup>

By dissociating Jews from the human race, a Jewish person became a sub-human blight that was a curse to the German race.

What the original Nazis did in Germany is immediately applicable to what the members of The Order did to their enemies. As Lauralyn Harris eloquently commented in our program notes:

By mentally reducing their opponents to the level of subhuman racial and ethnic stereotypes, the members of The Order are systematically able to distance themselves from the emotional consequences of their actions— from guilt, from shame, and especially from any sympathy for their victims. In their own minds, they are not murdering human beings, but “eliminating” The Enemy, The Anti-Christ, The ZOG. This mindset enables them to rewrite history, restructure reality, and even reshape God in their own twisted image.

Identity seen in the extreme through war, atrocities and prejudice is easy to recognize. People preoccupied with identity take everything personally and see only what they want to see, which helps to at least partly explain why Butler and Cooper enjoyed the play. If Cooper and Butler really did like, or perhaps even “love” the play, all this is perhaps a gentle reminder that love and hate are oftentimes very interrelated concepts. This is the very point that Vaclav Havel makes by suggesting that hate:

has a lot in common with love, chiefly with that self-transcending aspect of love, the fixation on others the dependence on them and in fact that the delegation of a piece of one's own identity to them... The hater longs for the object of his hatred. (bolded for emphasis)<sup>16</sup>

Ironically enough, the issue of identity is also inextricably connected to many of the politically correct, multi-cultural battle cries echoing so clearly throughout most of the hallowed halls of higher education. Favorite words for all identity thinkers, whose orientation is always in the first person, become—I, me, us, and we.<sup>17</sup> Inherent in “identity thinking” of any kind is a homogenized view of the world that finds diversity unacceptable. The Nazis attempted to eliminate the people who were different, but they are by no means the only ones in the world to attempt to homogenize difference. I strongly suspect, for instance, that the professor who stormed out of the theatre in the midst of the post play discussion was an inadvertent victim of the very kind of intolerance he was rebelling against. Whether politically correct or incorrect, whenever passion poisons the possibility of seeing past the self, the resultant identity thinking is a sure ticket to intolerance. Although their values are radically dissimilar, those that argued against Butler coming to W.S.U. and the neo-Nazis themselves are surprisingly alike—both share as it were a “secret identity”; both groups want to create a world in which the only inhabitants are people who fit into standards of common identity. One person voiced what I hope were the sentiments of many: “I started to hate the people in the play, and then to my horror realized that I was doing the same thing they were”—the human spirit shines brightest when the trap of identity is acknowledged, but then abolished.



## Notes

1. These flyers were distributed in the Moscow-Pullman area on March 28, 1992.
2. The most comprehensive study of Identity Christianity is Leonard Zeskind's, *The "Christian Identity" Movement: Analyzing Its Theological Reationalization for Racist and Anti-Semitic Violence*, (Atlanta: Center for Democratic Renewal, 1991). Another excellent source is: James Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), pp. 98-100, 260-63. Aho's sociological study is an excellent resource, in general, about white groups.
3. Leonard Zeskind, research director of the Center for Democratic Renewal says about the various white movements: "Everybody's their own little ideologue," quoted in *The Portland Alliance*, Sept. 1990, p. 6.
4. Richard Butler, *To Our Kinmen*: (Hayden Lake), p. 1. For those who respond to the recruitment flyers, this is the initial packet they usually receive. The packet includes the heraldry of the Aryan Nations, the Aryan Nations' theopolitical platform, a catalogue of books and a membership that states that the Aryan Nations excludes "Jews, Negroes, Mexicans, Orientals and Mongrels." Also in this pamphlet, which is designed to answer basic questions about the Church's philosophy, Butler urges "we pray fervently that those who read these words will do so in an objective manner and follow the Holy Spirit of God (Yahweh) to penetrate and enlighten." He also emphasizes that his church is "not a new Christian Church suddenly appearing on the scene [but rather it is] the on-going work of Jesus . . . calling His people to a state for their Nation to bring His Kingdom!"
5. Steven Dietz, *God's Country* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1990), p. 100. All subsequent citations to *God's Country* are to this edition.
6. The National Socialist Vanguard is based in The Dalles, Oregon and publishes a quarterly newsletter. In one of the newsletters (July/Sept. 1992) enclosed was a review of the University of California, Berkeley production of *God's Country*. At the end of the review was the following request: "If anybody has advance information regarding the performance of *God's Country* please notify us so we can notify those on our mailing list," p. 5.
7. For instance, in summing up the impact of Cooper's visit, a Native American student said in her journal, "What a speaker! Very articulate and [he] tries to present a convincing argument. If others are like him, no wonder they have followers! I must admit it was very hard for me to sit quietly. Especially when he said the Native Americans were here just to occupy the Americas for the immigrants (Ya Right!)."
8. Steven Dietz, *God's Country*, p. 55.
9. Steven Dietz, *God's Country*, p. 155-156.
10. Steven Dietz, *God's Country*, p. 25.
11. Steven Dietz, *God's Country*, p. 62.
12. Steven Dietz, *God's Country*, p. 137.
13. This is not to imply that they were completely uncritical of the production. Butler, for instance, felt that in both the play and the post play discussions, the more objective term "white separatist" should have been used instead of "white supremacists." Cooper felt that we shouldn't have had Robert Mathews smoking, since he knew for a fact he had always been a non-smoker. Also in a follow-up letter to me, Cooper mentioned that one of the actors was not familiar enough with Skinhead culture because his "portrayal of the Skinhead should have included more anger or borderline rage with accompanying voice inflections." The important point, however, is that overall, they both thoroughly enjoyed the production.
14. I met Father Wassmuth after he had given a talk about hate groups in the Northwest during the Faces of Racism conference (April 17-18, 1992) at W.S.U. He was gracious enough to let me borrow his lecture materials which proved tremendously helpful in putting together the white supremacy class at W.S.U. The Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment now concerns itself with hate groups of all kinds, but originally the Coeur d'Alene group acted as the watchdog specifically over Aryan Nations. When Father Wassmuth was chair of the Kootenai County Human Relations Task Force, his home was bombed on September 15, 1986, but he escaped injury.
15. *Time Magazine*, Sept. 17, 1990.

16. *Time Magazine*, Sept. 17, 1990.

17. For an excellent discussion the first person orientation inherent in identity thinking, see Robert Fritz, *Creating* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1991).

## Researching *God's Country* in God's Country

JOSEPH PROCTOR

I do not believe, as some profess and practice, that a director's preparation need be limited to careful study of the script only. It is critically important that a grasp of the play's total milieu be achieved, preceding and paralleling detailed script analysis, so that the director may be sensitized to recognize elements of character, relationships and events within the play, which otherwise might escape notice. "Hands-on" research (actually going to the places, living the occupations or experiences of the characters, etc.) is one very exciting and useful means to that end.

In the Winter of 1993, I directed a production of *God's Country*, by Steven Dietz, at The University of Montana, Missoula. Based on actual events and the right-wing racists involved in the murder of Denver talk-radio host, Alan Berg, the play also offers a broad profile of the white-separatist movement. Since a substantial part of the story contained in the play originated at the Aryan Nations compound in the Hayden Lake area of northern Idaho, a three-hour drive from Missoula, I had a special opportunity to exercise "hands-on" research. In July, 1992, I took advantage of that opportunity.

### The Script

- The main story of the play revolves around three inter-connected personages: Alan Berg, Robert Jay Mathews and Denver Parmenter.

Berg, the prominent and provocative Jewish talk-radio host in Denver, was murdered in 1984 in a gangland-style killing outside his residence. Known for his liberal, anti-racist views, he was both loved and hated by an ever-growing, national radio audience. Berg was adept at exploiting hot, divisive topics, especially those involving right-wing points of view. Several of these programs brought him into on-air contact with David Lane, a resident of Denver and Ku Klux Klan member.

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Michael Gallacher/Missoulian

The University of Montana production of *God's Country*.

Lane eventually moved to northern Idaho to join the racist organization, Aryan Nations, led by Richard Butler, who also served as pastor of the Church of Jesus Christ Christian, a "Christian Identity" denomination located in the Aryan Nations compound. There, Lane met Robert Jay Mathews and Denver Parmenter, both right-wing racists allied with Aryan Nations. Mathews, bright, charismatic and a born leader, recruited a number of men from Aryan Nations, including Lane and Parmenter, to form a para-military group known as "The Order," dedicated to the eradication of dark-skinned and non-Aryan peoples, beginning in the Pacific Northwest. "The Order" was a name derived from *The Turner Diaries*, a book written by William Pierce under the *nom de plume*, Andrew Macdonald, the fictional hero/author of the "diaries." The book chronicles an imagined American race war of the late twentieth century resulting in the destruction of the "evil" races and ascension of the white-Aryans to control.

To put *The Order* on solid financial footing, Mathews' group accumulated weapons and considerable money through a series of major robberies throughout Washington, Oregon and California. One of the weapons, owned by a member of the group, was eventually identified as the gun which killed Alan Berg. Mathews and Lane were implicated in the assassination though neither was charged or convicted of the crime.

As the play opens, it is 1985 and we are in a Seattle courtroom listening to the testimony of Denver Parmenter, who has turned state's witness against a number of his Order compatriots who are accused of conspiracy. Juxtaposed with actual trial testimony is an imagined scene, a flashback from perhaps 1983, depicting the consecration of a baby by members of The Order and a "pledge" by these members to remain true to each other and their beliefs, the penalty for disloyalty being death. The pledging by The Order members counterpoints Parmenter's trial testimony, seeming to haunt him with the danger of his betrayal of the group. Shortly after, we are introduced to Alan Berg in a verbal joust with two right-wing racists, their words taken from actual radio transcripts. From there, we jump to the fictional monologue of a farmer who has been unexpectedly defended by a Posse Comitatus group against a sheriff determined to foreclose on the farmer's house and land. Next, the actors move into a "neutral" mode and, with the help of slide-projections, introduce the audience to the principal members of The Order. Then, we are introduced to Robert Jay Mathews who delivers a biographical/philosophical monologue drawn from his own letters. The play continues in this fragmented and episodic manner for its two acts.

As we follow the events surrounding Alan Berg and The Order, the playwright jolts the audience to fresh perspectives of the story and issues by juxtaposing actual transcripts and personages with surrealistic monologues, factual narrations and fictional characters to form a mosaic of particular events on a background of right-wing ideology. We hear the words of racists like Richard Butler, Tom Metzger and Thom Robb;

we experience cross burnings, robberies, right-wing indoctrinations of children and murders; we witness the actors of the play assuming numerous roles/functions to tell us the story in a marvelously theatrical and provocatively stimulating manner. Ultimately, we learn that racial intolerance, resulting in vicious crimes like the murder of Alan Berg, has a long and troubling history in this country and, sadly, is alive and well today.

### Hands-on Research . . .

At the end of the narrow gravel road I came to a guardhouse and a semaphore gate in the down position, blocking entrance to the compound. On the front of the guardhouse, hung prominently and in bold print, was a sign with the words, "WHITES ONLY." The portly armed guard, in Aryan Nations uniform and carrying a clipboard, moved quickly to my car window. "Name please," he commanded, pushing his face into mine, only breaking his gaze occasionally to make a quick note. "Proctor," I responded. "From Missoula, huh," he said, smiling sardonically, then added, "I have your plates down," referring to the license notation he'd already made as I came up the road. Thirty dollars later and with surprisingly few questions asked, the gate was raised, and I prepared to drive into the Aryan Nations compound to attend the Aryan National Congress, held each summer at this isolated, wooded enclave of mostly frame buildings, surrounded by a high perimeter fence and patrolled by armed guards with attack dogs. "One last thing," the gate-guard said louder than needed, his face again thrust into mine, "I'm going to keep my eye on YOU."

Nevertheless, I drove my car past the gate and into the compound, weaving around buildings, tents and campers, passing several groups of plaid-shirted men sitting around camp stoves, finally arriving at the "parking lot," a grassy area on the edge of the encampment next to the perimeter fence. A misty rain lent an eerie tone to the already ominous atmosphere of the place. As I neared an open spot, I had to swerve the car to miss some object partially buried in the high grass—a large, wooden construction wrapped with plastic to keep it dry. It was the cross that would be burned the following night by the men, women and children attending this Congress. They would be clad in their full Klan-style robes and many would hold torches. They would listen to an inspirational oration from Richard Butler, aging leader of Aryan Nations. Then, they would raise their arms in Nazi salute and in unison exclaim, "Hail Victory!"

After parking my car, I noted that my elderly Toyota was the only Japanese-made model in the lot, except for one flashy red Nissan with a Confederate flag tattooed over the rear window. This, I knew, was consistent with the anti-Oriental and "Buy American" sentiments harbored by these and related white-separatist groups. I made my way to the church in the center of the compound where, as the program I had received at the gate indicated, there would be welcoming and keynote speeches delivered that evening.

Squeezing through six to eight men, puffing on cigarettes, clustered on the small side porch, I entered the narrow foyer of the church building. There I encountered large bulletin boards crammed with supremacist literature—clippings from regional and national newspapers, articles and interviews with Richard Butler and other racist bigwigs. A number of the postings, flyers with right-wing propaganda and racist cartoons, had been printed by Aryan Nations within the compound. The first impressions of entering this hate-camp were to stay with me throughout the production process of *God's Country*—the uneasiness created by the ever-present stares of the Aryan guards, the feeling of entrapment within the perimeter fence, the hate literature plastered on the foyer walls of the church, the grayness of the day and of the human spirits gathered there.

I walked the ten feet or so down the foyer to the rear of the sanctuary. It was a small room, seating approximately a hundred in the pews and perhaps fifty more in the chairs at the rear. It reminded me of the many small, fundamentalist churches of the rural South where I had attended revival meetings as a youth. But there were striking differences. On the front of the pulpit was a carved Aryan Nations insignia and at the center rear of the dais was a table holding an upright sword. Hanging to one side of the area was the Aryan Nations flag; on the other, a red and white flag emboldened with the black Nazi swastika. Two men, seated in the chairs in front of me, were in conversation as I looked about the room. One asked the other, "Know what the difference is between an automobile tire and a nigger?" "No, I can't say as I do," replied the second man. "A tire doesn't sing when you put chains on it." I retreated outside.

Fortunately, the men on the porch had finished another round of cigarettes and were now in conversation. Unfortunately, this meant a heavy dose of more racist "humor." I was reprieved a short time later when everyone's attention turned to a diminutive man making his way across the yard toward us. I recognized him almost immediately as Thom Robb, Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard from Arkansas, whose picture had been in *Time* magazine only weeks before. He and the others exchanged pleasantries; the men obviously revering the small preacher. Robb's presence was an unexpected and welcome surprise, since the role of Pastor Three in *God's Country* is based on his preachings. The script, in fact, calls for a slide projection of Robb when Pastor Three enters in Klan robes at the close of Act 1.

Opening ceremonies began a short time later after all participants had been summoned to the sanctuary by a tolling church bell. I attempted to blend-in and chose to sit in the center of a pew in the middle of the room, not realizing how conspicuous I would be as the proceedings developed. On the left I was flanked by skinheads, adorned with an assortment of red suspenders, boots, camouflage clothing, chains and tattoos. In front and to the right were Aryan Nations guards, one of whom kept

turning around to stare at me. Behind me was a young woman in long dress, braided hair falling over her shoulders, no makeup, nursing her baby.

The women at the Congress (including some who addressed the congregation) were quite varied in their dress and, to a degree, in their notion of what women's roles should be in the movement. There were the female skinheads, every bit as radical in their clothing as their male counterparts—one with half-shaved head and tattoo on the bald half, reflecting English "punk" influence. Another significant group seemed to fall into the "seen-not-heard" syndrome of fixing the victuals for the crowd and tending to the children. Then, there were those women who had some official function within the various organizations present. One young woman, representing Aryan Nations women, was neatly attired in uniform and demurely spoke to the congregation on the second day. Timidly reading her speech, she repeatedly said "excuse me" and "I'm sorry," as she was "unused to speaking to such a large group." Her central points, beyond a report on recruitment, were "Aryan Nations women should stay at home and raise their children. But an Aryan woman should be educated so that she can teach her children in the proper ways." Further, "An Aryan Nations woman is less than half a woman without a good Aryan Nations man (and vice versa). Together, they are whole."

This notion of the woman standing by (or behind) her man, bearing, caring for, and teaching the children, seemed to be the prevailing view of most present. It is reflected in the play when in Act II, three women, serving as surrogate teachers, drill a boy in supremacist doctrine while tossing him a football and, later, in the role of Zillah Craig, when she bears a child to Bob Mathews, then echoes his philosophical beliefs to the audience at the close of the play. She literally stands by him in this moment, holding the new-born in her arms. Perhaps the strongest parallel to Zillah, though, was evident in a young woman, representing the Family Assistance Project (FAP), who also spoke on the second day. Very well-spoken, intelligent and attractive, she appealed to the group to support her program with clothing donations and money to aid the families of right-wing "P.O.W.s" and "political prisoners" currently doing prison time. Her husband, she told the group, was one such prisoner. I was struck by how much more powerful her approach became through her intelligence and charm. One could almost forget momentarily the scrambled thinking underlying her appeal. In this respect, she even resembled Bob Mathews, who reputedly was quite handsome, articulate, charismatic and, therefore, all the more dangerous.

The speakers on the first evening were Carl Franklin, second in command at Aryan Nations; Richard Butler (the model for Pastor One in the play); John Ross Taylor, Aryan Nations Canadian Ambassador; and Thom Robb. Franklin, ineffectual and tedious in manner, dealt mostly with orientation matters. Butler, however, spoke with clarity and inspired a palpable fear in the throng. This was "no longer our country," he

railed, because it is "full of niggers, Mexicans and gooks of all kinds." His theme was the confusion of the terms, "country" and "nation." Nation, he said, was your race. Country was the territory where your race rightfully resides. The United States is no longer a country for the Aryan (white, northern European) nation. Therefore, a new country (the "Northwest Mountain Republic," mentioned in the play) must be formed from the five northwest states, plus parts of southern and southwestern Canada. Presumably, the racial contaminants, predominately of the urban West Coast, would then be transported out of the area, effecting a racially-pure country ruled by an Aryan nation. Butler emphasized, as did a number of the other speakers throughout the two days, that the formation of this white homeland was inevitable and imminent since the long-predicted "race war" was already underway. (The Rodney King beating by Los Angeles police and accompanying riots had occurred only a short time before this Congress.) It was during Butler's speech that the whole crowd began to echo their approval periodically with Nazi salutes. The first of these took me totally by surprise—arms suddenly raised in front, to the side and around my head from the rear, in the "Heil Hitler" position, accompanied by the resounding "Hail Victory!" As these salutes peppered this and future speeches, I felt more and more isolated and obvious. My non-participation was clearly noticed.

John Ross Taylor and Thom Robb rounded-out the evening with rambling and often cryptic orations. Taylor, endlessly digressing with biblical and historical numbers and dates, finally concluded that the "revolution" will most certainly occur in 1993 or 1994. That gave us about a year to get our canned goods set aside and guns ready. Robb, also heavily mired in biblical passages from Ezekiel (something about "bones coming together"), apparently confused even himself to the point that he stopped ten minutes into the sermon with the question directed to the rear of the sanctuary, "How long am I supposed to talk? Five minutes? Ten?" No audible answer came forth. Robb abruptly shifted to a "preservation of race" theme and concluded quickly with "Religion is the key for the right-wing. All movements will fail without God." I almost couldn't wait to drive out of the compound and to my motel room that first night, since this was a most depressing and claustrophobic place, I thought. As I drove to the front gate, I encountered the same guard who had admitted me hours before. He quickly raised the gate and I, in a casually friendly manner, took my right hand off the steering wheel for a motionless wave of thanks. He apparently took this gesture as an abbreviated Nazi salute to which he responded with the fuller version, including a rigid, full-body "attention" and clicking of heels. As I drove out into the night along the narrow gravel road, I screamed to the empty car, "This can't be happening!"

Reflecting in my motel room on the events of that afternoon and evening, I made copious notes of everything and everyone I'd encountered. I had not taken notes in the compound or church for fear of attracting

attention and questions from the guards. Now unimpeded, I furiously recorded everything designers, actors and this director might at some point wish to know or recall during the conceptual development and specific choice-making of the artistic-production process. I covered physical and emotional impressions, themes and quotes of the speakers, chronology of events, clothing (including detailed sketches of uniforms), behavior (mechanics of the Nazi salute, etc.), and both direct and overheard conversations. The chronicling of this material—facts, faces, words, figures, as well as psychological impressions, recorded the essence of my hands-on directorial research.

The second day of the Congress began with a 7 a.m. breakfast of biscuits, gravy, pancakes, eggs and juice served from the small food shed adjacent to the church. The tolling bell convened us in the sanctuary at 9 a.m. where we were welcomed by several of the first day's speakers including Butler, Franklin, and the seemingly deranged Canadian, John Ross Taylor. The congregation was largely the same as the previous night with a few significant additions, most notably several young men from Texas who resembled Hitler Youth and were dressed like Storm Troopers. Clad in black shiny knee boots, black pants, khaki shirts, black ties, black military caps and SS insignias, they made a most impressive collection on the pew in front of me. Sitting very erect throughout the morning speeches, they obviously relished the opportunities to perform in unison and with practiced vigor the "Hail Victory" salutes.

The speakers on this second day were quite varied in their subjects and delivery style. In contrast to the demure women mentioned earlier, the men tended to be more radical and abrasive than those on the first day. Some random expressions included: "ZOG mongrels" (Zionist Occupation Government); "slimy Jews"; "Jews media" (the ZOG media supposedly left off the first part of the Rodney King video tape, establishing his dangerousness, in their reporting of the incident to purposely inspire black backlash). This nonsense culminated in the tirade of one Harold Von Brauhut, a mini-Hitler in style and leader of the Maryland Aryan Nations contingent, who began his address in German then crescendoed in English to "My greatest joy would be to smash the heads of every Jew-kike, nigger and gook like watermelons." He then focused pointedly on the congregation assembled before him and with feverish vindictiveness accused them of tolerating "race traitors" (white liberals).

Again, I found myself counting the minutes to the mid-morning "song break" indicated in the program. I was deeply tired of the speakers, the Nazi salutes, the racist rhetoric, and hoped that there would be music pleasant enough to listen to or even to join in singing with the group. Finally, the loosely bound songbooks were distributed. As I thumbed through mine, I recognized most of the hymns, including such old standards as "Amazing Grace" and "The Old Rugged Cross." Unfortunately, the song leader directed us to the first song of the book, "The Hymn of the Aryan Nation," words by George Lincoln Rockwell, assassinated leader

of the American Nazi Party. Later, however, we were to sing the old favorites, including at least ten verses of "Amazing Grace." This commingling of Christian music with racist ideology is common and was to find its expression in our production of *God's Country*.

The final speaker on the second day was Rick Cooper, movement ideologist and editor/publisher of *The National Socialist Vanguard*, a neo-Nazi newspaper. Although his speech was comparatively tame and unmemorable, Cooper and I were to remain in contact by phone and letter until after the production in 1993. He, in fact, was to send letters informing his subscribers of our performance dates. He "reviewed" us in *The Vanguard* as well.

When the morning ordeal was finally over, and we had adjourned to the courtyard, I discovered that large tables had been set up to display various pamphlets, books, patches and gear of Aryan Nations, Ku Klux Klan, and other groups. As I meandered through the tables, collecting some of the free materials, it occurred to me that this might well be the place to find *The Turner Diaries*, the book figuring prominently in the story of The Order. In addition to being the philosophical and tactical outline for The Order's operations, the book is also a hand property in the play. I had tried to locate it through normal bookstore avenues with no success. Not seeing it here either, I approached a man in KKK uniform who seemed to be in charge of one of the tables. "Excuse me," I began, "do you know where I might locate a copy of *The Turner Diaries*?" He responded abruptly with "You won't find *The Turner Diaries* here. It's not approved Klan literature. Too violent." "I see," I nodded, as I turned back to the tables. "But," he added quickly, "you can order it through Aryan Nations over there," pointing to a stack of printed order forms. "It's a GREAT book," he whispered under his breath.

#### ... To Production

Prior to attending the Aryan National Congress, I had become intimately familiar with the story of The Order, the "separatist" (their word) movement, the Alan Berg murder, what the playwright, Steven Dietz, had to say about the play and, of course, the play itself through numerous books, videos and careful play analysis. This familiarity prepared me to know what and who I was looking for in the visit to the Aryan Nations compound and to recognize unexpected opportunities. I was very careful, however, to avoid specific conceptualization and choice-making related to production prior to the hands-on experience. I wanted to "know my stuff" going in but be free to learn and react without interpretive prejudice.

The script of *God's Country* presents many interpretive challenges and opportunities to the director, actors and designers. While its thematic scope is at once narrow and broad, it is written in the aforementioned fragmented, episodic style reminiscent of Brechtian or "Living Newspaper" forms of previous eras. I believe the playwright's intent, by adopting

this form, is to prevent the audience from sustained emotional, cathartic involvement with the characters of the play as the story develops in performance. Rather, by continually breaking the action line in an obviously theatrical or "rough-theatre" manner, he forces the listener/viewer to think during the performance and to feel after—hopefully serving as inspiration to go out into the world to effect social change.

Seeking to be consistent with this intent, the production team sought to create a performance space which was frankly theatrical but which contained specific factual elements and ambiance consistent with the director's impressions of Aryan Nations. Prior to performance, even as the audience entered the theatre, this concept was at work.

Outside the flexible Masquer Theatre, directional lights highlighted foyer walls plastered with reproductions of Aryan Nations and other supremacist literature, cartoons and pamphlets, just like the church foyer at Hayden Lake. As each audience member entered the performance space, he or she met the cold stare of a uniformed Aryan Nations guard. The uniforms were authentic, accented with actual shoulder patches purchased from Aryan Nations through the order catalog. In each seat was more racist literature—"Steps to Achieve an Aryan Nation"; "Was There Really a Holocaust?" On loudspeakers were radio interviews with authorities on and participants in various right-wing separatist movements.

Looking about the performance space, one saw a variety of dark gray, raised platform-disks, tilted in assorted directions, and scattered about the open space in a theatrically non-traditional manner. Ramps jutted through the seating areas from three directions. The lighting was dim, gray. The principal acting areas, the raised disks and ramps, bore Nazi, Aryan Nations and KKK insignias as well as large, newsprint-style fragments of newspaper headlines stenciled in light gray. Upon closer inspection, these would be seen as relating in subject to the Alan Berg murder and other criminal activities of The Order. Lurking in the shadows all about the performance space were figures in military camouflage or business suits, farmer's clothing or neutral attire—these enigmatic shapes would later become the actors of this dramatic event but were now like the menacing presence of those perpetually-peripheral individuals I had encountered for two days at Hayden Lake. The whole ambiance of this pre-show scene was dim, gray, ominous—like my impression of the compound.

In the performance we utilized harsh, bright, unfiltered down-light to pinpoint the actors, who were dressed in newspaper photograph-like blacks, whites and grays for the courtroom scenes which were staged on the large, raked disk in the center of the room. The reality of this story and these people seemed to thrust into the audience's face with all the disturbingly stark truth of today's newspaper headlines. Slide photographs and video projections, which loomed above the arena on large projection screens, were not fabricated and "characterized" but were actual pictures of the people of the story. The video, purchased through the Aryan

Nations catalog and including an actual cross-lighting ceremony, was shot at a previous Aryan National Congress in Hayden Lake. The on-stage cross-lighting at the close of Act 1 was modeled after the ceremony at Hayden Lake—the KKK figures actually carried lit torches on stage and performed the appropriate ritual of lifting them toward the cross in the full view and presence of the audience. As the performance unfolded, so did large KKK, Aryan Nations, and Nazi flags, suspended from the lighting grid above the audience.

The costume designer more aptly clothed the people of the play rather than costumed the characters. The Father, the Farmer, Berg, the two “conspiratologists,” the Aryan Nations guards and others who were not part of the courtroom trial scenes were in clothes based on direct observations of either actual photographs or on character “models” seen at the Aryan National Congress. This clothing was natural in color and style—we wanted these people to appear totally contemporary, as though they could be sitting in the audience themselves or in the church sanctuary. The Skinhead, I can verify, looked like a skinhead. In all but actual body, he had sat in front of me in a pew for four hours on a Friday in Hayden Lake. When the Skinhead appeared in the production, he was blatantly aggressive, threatening and violent—much like Von Braunhut and other speakers at the Congress. There is indeed a violence, a deep-seated aggressiveness in the hearts and psyches of the people who rallied at me for two days. This, as well as numerous other intentionally confrontational moments, led one audience member to observe that “this was really assault theatre.”

### Conclusion

Audiences were often disturbed by the experience of this production. Large percentages of those present elected to remain for discussions following performances, often staying well past midnight to ask questions and to attempt to find answers for their distress. I believe this was a result of our pursuit of authenticity and immediacy in our production approach, aided by hands-on research. We did not allow the audience to hide “behind the fourth wall.” Indeed, in the face of this aggressive and confrontational approach, it is difficult to remain quiet and emotionally “neutral.” There were many times at the Congress when I wanted to stand up and scream at the speakers or to grab what appeared to be an intelligent and educated participant and shake them into their senses. Apparently, some audience members had similar feelings while experiencing this production.

The playwright provides ample opportunities for interpreters to examine various points of view on the subject matter and, by seeking to present each of these points of view truthfully and without consistent bias to one side or the other, I believe we managed to rouse the emotions of virtually everyone at sometime during the evening. Several

white-separatists from the Hayden Lake area attended performances and post-performance discussions. These men had been alerted to our production by Rick Cooper of *The National Socialist Vanguard*. They were quite vocal in discussions and expressed both admiration for our objective presentation of the facts and distress at what they felt were sections which ridiculed them and their ideas. Though often tedious and haranguing in discussions, they certainly stimulated much interest among the audiences and, in the final analysis, I was pleased that they attended. Again, it brought home the reality of their existence. Judging by the high attendance at this production and in post-performance discussions, as well as coverage of the news media, I believe we achieved our intended goals of informing our citizens of the issues involved and alerting our community to the close proximity of these hate groups. One of the most important things learned by going to Aryan Nations was the existence of the broad range of personalities and circumstances influencing these right-wing movements. Some followers are there not because of initial racial or ethnic prejudice, but because they are often the downtrodden of society and are looking for someone or something to blame for their condition. The hate-groups provide easy explanations and convenient targets: Jewish bankers, immigrants, blacks, the Government, etc.

I cannot imagine approaching this production WITHOUT hands-on research. The assemblage of books, photographs and videos were invaluable in preparing me to receive the stimuli at Hayden Lake but could never REPLACE the firsthand impressions and discoveries made by attending the Congress and meeting the people. Having exposed the designers and the cast to the books and videos, it was extremely important to speak to them further with the confidence of having actually witnessed, perceived and felt some of the “real thing.” Beyond the psychological reinforcement for the director, however, I am certain that production colleagues and audiences were inspired to a greater sense of accuracy and truth about what continues to be one of the most troubling problems facing our society—racial intolerance.

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Barbara Ginshurg as Nora Joyce in the Oregon State University production of *SigNora Joyce*.

## Cutting a Dash: Creating a Costume for Nora—Designing Clothes for Gemma O'Connor's *SigNora Joyce*<sup>1</sup>

CHARLOTTE J. HEADRICK AND ROBIN WAYTENICK

She was always good with clothes and linen, perhaps a skill acquired from her mother, who was a dressmaker. Many of her photographs suggest a facility with fabric, ribbons, and starched ruffles. Even as a girl, she liked good clothes and admired them on others.<sup>2</sup>

On October 14-16, 1993, the University Theatre of Oregon State University produced the American premiere of Gemma O'Connor's, *SigNora Joyce*. The play is a one-woman depiction of the life of Nora Barnacle Joyce, wife of James Joyce. Since it is written to be performed without intermission, the character of Nora Joyce had to remain on stage for the duration of the play, approximately one hour and fifteen minutes.

One of the problems facing the director and costume designer was how to make Nora visually interesting. Since *SigNora Joyce* is a memory play ranging not only from the present (1931 in the Oregon State production)<sup>3</sup> but also back to Nora's childhood and even forward to events later in Nora's life, her single costume became a challenge. Additionally, the costume had to be authentic to the periods, the correct choice for the actress' freedom of movement, and lovely enough to hold the audience's attention for over an hour. Further, the play was to be produced in the intimate Cortright Studio Theatre which accommodated ninety audience members. At times the actress would be a mere two feet away from the audience. Consequently, attention to the detailing in her costume was crucial.

The historic Nora, "clothes-mad all her life,"<sup>4</sup> loved a beautiful wardrobe and was particularly fond of furs and hats.<sup>5</sup> There are several references in the script to Nora's clothing, her love of fashion, and her taste

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in dress. As the character enters the stage in the beginning of the play, it is obvious she has been shopping, particularly for hats. Her lines establish the joy she takes in fine clothes:

I've been doing a bit of shopping. Takes your mind off things. D'you think does this suit me? Yes... yes, I suppose... yes it'll do. I always think there's nothing like a new hat for raising the spirits... D'you know something but? If I had a sudden windfall I'd buy a whole new wardrobe. Well, you have to look nice don't you? No good streeeling around like a pauper. Not to be always and ever wearing the same auld thing...<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the play, there are repeated references to clothes and fashion:

The new fashions were in. There wasn't much I could afford but. Still, no harm in looking.<sup>7</sup>

Jim could do with a new hat... hmmm... not to mention a new suit... even so, he manages to keep himself very smart... Now if I could only get him out of those white canvas shoes! He's in them night and day. Honest to God it's mortifying every time we go into a restaurant. The waiters look as if they wonder whether to show us to the tennis courts or the table. (p. 4)

I had on a new pair of gloves and a new bit of fur trimming to my coat collar. Three and sixpence from Switzers. (p. 18)

Oh the disgrace of it! Being hauled off to the priest by the collar of my coat. My best coat as well! (p. 40)

I arrived with all innocence and four trunks of my best clothes. Plus the few nice things I picked up in Dublin on the way. Left myself short of money by doing so: A fur from Elvery's, a couple of hats and coats for the children. (p. 45)

O'Connor's Nora is true to the historic personage. Nora Joyce prided herself in her elegant sense of style and in O'Connor's play, the character's many references reinforce this aspect of Nora's personality.

The costume designer, Robin Waytenick, was assisted by Nancy Bryant, Associate Professor of the Department of Apparel, Interiors, Housing, and Merchandise in the College of Home Economics. In 1986, Prof. Bryant drafted a pattern and built a dress based on an actual 1929 garment in the textiles collection of the College of Home Economics.<sup>8</sup> Not only was Bryant's reproduction from the correct period, it was also a good fit for the actress assigned to play the role, Barbara Ginsburg.

Although the line and fit worked well, the color and fabric of the reproduction were not right for the character of Nora. Since Nora was famous for her dark auburn hair (actress Ginsburg's own dark tresses had been rinsed in henna), Waytenick found a deep olive green silk crepe. Oregon State's resident costume designer, Marie Chesley, was cutter and stitcher on Waytenick's adaptation, crafting an elegant bias cut garment based on the Bryant reproduction.

The finished dress was composed of forty-two individual pieces and was accented by a pale blue silk tie. The sleeves and bodice of the original dress were redesigned to make them fuller, so that the actress could move more freely on stage. The asymmetrical skirt was lengthened to an even mid-calf to create a more stylish line. Accessories added the finish to the costume. Period shoes, stockings, purse, gloves, hat, and fox furs

completed the ensemble of Nora on her first entrance. Additionally, Nora wore a simple strand of pearls and a wedding ring. Although the historic Nora admired earrings on others, she thought they made her look "common"<sup>9</sup> and wore none herself.

The initial look was altered as the play unfolded. Nora shed her furs, gloves and hat then proceeded to try on other hats she had purchased: "What about this one? Will it do, d'you think? Y'know the shops around here aren't up to much. Still it's hard to go wrong with black." (p. 4) Biographer Brenda Maddox authenticates Nora's lifelong love of millinery in a description of an argument between the Joyces while living in Trieste: "Even in Galway, Nora had a passion for style, fabric, cut, and line, especially in hats..."<sup>10</sup>

At the outset of the Oregon State production, Nora "shared" her new purchases with the audience, unwrapping a package to reveal a period nightgown which she held up to her body. This piece of business was executed as she described her husband's encouragement to go shopping, again emphasizing the significance of her fine taste, "You know he thinks the world of me, don't you? And he likes me to dress well. He likes watching me doing it too..." (p. 6)

In addition to providing theatrical business, costumes also functioned both as set dressing and as a way to establish a time frame. Period clothing, belonging to Nora's unseen daughter, Lucia, was strewn about the stage. At various points in the action, Nora picked up and folded the clutter Lucia has discarded, "Would you look at the way she's left the place... as scattered as herself... Up and off! Up and off the whole time!" (p. 2)

James Joyce was also represented by costumes on stage with a coat, hat, and pair of dark spectacles. The actress used all three items, once as she did an imitation of Joyce with the hat and spectacles, and at another time, when she wrapped herself in Joyce's jacket while recalling a sensual moment between them.

At various points in the production, Ms. Ginsburg used her costume to reveal character, lifting her skirt to reveal her stockings: "I'd let him see my garters the new ones and make him hot for me turn red... touch me lift up your skirts..." (p. 24).<sup>11</sup> She also altered her look by letting her hair down. Chesley and Waytenick, while watching a rehearsal, suggested changing the actress's hair to give a different look to Nora. Ginsburg and Headrick took the suggestion and devised a sequence in which Nora, thinking about her younger self, released the combs and let her hair down. Toward the end of the play, as Nora examined her later years, she rearranged her hair, visually putting away "girlhood."

At two points in the Oregon State production, the actress used shawls. Mid-way in the play, Nora recalled Lucia's difficult birth. Picking up a piece of Lucia's clutter, a Liberty of London paisley shawl in shades of burgundy and brown, Ms. Ginsburg began to fold the shawl, cradling it,

slowly transforming the fabric into a swaddled baby. The other shawl, in shades of red and green paisley, hung from the coat rack with Joyce's coat. During the last moments of the play, Nora wrapped herself in the shawl uttering O'Connor's words which had been adapted from the final sequence of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

Although costume is always important in delineating character, in a one-woman play it becomes a crucial element. Toward the end of the play, Nora described her disappointment on returning to Ireland for the last time: "... all the time I'd dreamed of cutting a dash... knocking their eyes out... being someone..." (p. 51). The real Nora and the one created by Gemma O'Connor may have been disappointed by her family's reaction to her when she returned to Ireland in 1922, but in the Oregon State University production, with the creative talents of Nancy Bryant, Robin Waytenick, and Marie Chesley, Barbara Ginsburg's Nora in her handsome dress was able to impress her audience and "cut a dash."

#### Notes

1. "When all the time I'd dreamed of cutting a dash... knocking their eyes out... being someone..." in Gemma O'Connor, *SigNora Joyce*, unpublished manuscript, 1992, p. 51. The title contains a literary pun: "Signora (Madame or Mrs.), "Si, Nora (Yes, Nora), "Signora."

2. Brenda Maddox, *Nora, the Real Life Molly Bloom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.), 1988, p. 20.

3. The London production was set in the mid-1920's.

4. Maddox, p. 225.

5. Nora, who basked in Joyce's interest in her wardrobe, shared with him his love for fur... When he returned, she would also have, as he described with great delight, a hat, a stole, and muff of gray squirrel... the hat decorated with violets at the side, and the stole and muff lined with violet satin. There would be more, he promised. If the cinema succeeded, she would have more fine clothes than she ever dreamed of. For an immediate gift, he sent Nora several pairs of gloves... ", Maddox, p. 100.

6. O'Connor, p. 3. Because *SigNora Joyce* is in manuscript, O'Connor's punctuation, including the use of frequent ellipses, has been duplicated in this paper; quotations are reproduced as they appear in the playwright's manuscript. The play is written in Irish dialect and certain spellings are used to denote dialect.

7. O'Connor, p. 19. Subsequent references to *SigNora Joyce* will be noted by page number after the quotation.

8. For an article on this creation, see Nancy Bryant, "Historic Chic," *Threads*, vol. 18, Aug./Sept., 1988, pp. 38-42.

9. Maddox, p. 219.

10. Maddox, p. 68.

11. Gemma O'Connor uses a pastiche of James Joyce's own words in her play. The lack of punctuation and run-on thoughts are similar to Joyce's style in *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses*.

## Theatre in Britain

FORREST SEARS

The 1994 English Summer Theatre season will likely enter the record books as the year of the classical revival. It is true that every season there are selected re-mountings of great plays. During this last summer's visit, however, I feasted on Shakespeare, Corneille, Wycherley, Ibsen, Chekhov, Wilde, Shaw, Feydeau, Cocteau, Rattigan, and Priestley. The downside of this was the absence of new work by British dramatists. Ironically, it was the anemic American Theatre that offered a transfusion of blood with new works by Arthur Miller and David Mamet. I'll hone in on a few of the highlights, looking at two veteran Yanks at the Royal National Theatre, a near forgotten British voice from the 70's, a French "unproduceable" gem, and an early Ibsen masterwork.

At 79, Arthur Miller is experiencing his most prolific period in several decades. Already in the 1990s, he has been represented by three new plays in London. His latest work, *Broken Glass*, which had a short unsuccessful New York run, has been re-written. It opened last August at the Royal National Theatre, directed by David Thacker, who scored a great recent success with his, *The Last Yankee*.

Miller made his reputation responding to the social upheaval which followed World War II. Today, with headlines screaming Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia, the playwright's old passions are re-triggered with new insights. He returns to the first draft of a play he wrote as a 24-year-old in 1939, *The Golden Years*. It dealt with the first experience of ethnic cleansing—*Kristalnacht*, November 9, 1938—when all of Germany's Jewish community was subjected to a reign of terror unprecedented in the modern era. This assassination of Jews was ostensibly in retaliation for the shooting of Ernst Von Path, the Secretary of the German Embassy in Poland, by a Polish Jew, Herschel Grynszpan. *Kristalnacht* is considered the official prelude to the Holocaust. This 55-year-old play has now metamorphosed into *Broken Glass*. As with his best plays—*All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge*—Miller interweaves

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stories of the common man creating moving metaphors that merge private problems with burning social issues.

In *Broken Glass* he chooses a Jewish couple, Phillip and Sylvia Gellburg, who have been married for some twenty years. Phillip is a man possessed with massive self-hatred who is employed in a prestigious WASP New York realty firm. Sylvia is a bright, socially sensitive woman who has suddenly and mysteriously lost the use of her legs. She is confined to a wheelchair. The play takes us on a journey as the couple search for the source of Sylvia's affliction. Is it organic or functional? This is, of course, familiar territory covered in past American dramas such as *Home of the Brave* and Kim Stanley's great success, *A Far Country*. The latter is a play specifically dealing with Freud's work with a patient in a classical case of conversion hysteria. Lest this all seem old hat, Miller has realized another level. He discovered in his research for the play that there was a significantly higher amount of physical paralysis, of Sylvia's description, among American Jews during the holocaust than in any other time in their history. We have seen this phenomenon reoccurring in our own time, verifiable evidence of Cambodian women having a high incidence of hysterical blindness after the horror afflicted by the Khmer Rouge in their country.

Miller uses Sylvia's paralysis as a metaphor for denial in the face of truth. He also humanizes her by dramatizing her long-standing sexual frustrations with Philip. These problems require the introduction of the inevitable doctor-figure in the character of Harry Hyman. He is a warm, passionate man who finds himself in the classic dilemma of falling in love with his patient. It is a tribute to Miller that in this familiar dramatic territory, he manages to hold us with fresh characterization and gripping suspense.

In the role of Phillip, Henry Goldman (who was superb as Roy Cohn in *Angels in America* in the Royal National Theatre's production) illuminates both his pain and guilt with incisive skill. Ken Stott, one of England's most versatile character actors, here as Dr. Hyman, reveals a different side of his talent as he employs the opposites of compassion and lust for the wife in a subtle performance. Finally, Margot Leicester as Sylvia, illuminates the role with a deep emotionality, managing to be both vulnerable and assertive in the play's pivotal role.

David Thacker again demonstrates a keen perception of Miller's world and people. He directs with seamless precision. The production is one of the must-see's of this British theatre season.

For the past three decades, American critics have been saying to Miller "I know thee not old man," while in England he continues to be revered as America's premiere playwright. Isn't it time for our critics to embrace the enduring significance of the works of Arthur Miller? We're no longer such a young, upstart country that we dare not have respect for age and wisdom, to say nothing of talent. There's something to be said for National Treasures.

Both Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams remain mainstream playwrights in Britain. Rare is the season that one or both of these dramatists, whose glory years on Broadway were the 1940's and 50's, is not represented in London. The current production of *Sweet Bird of Youth* is the second I have seen there. The first, starring Lauren Bacall, was staged in the late 70's.

The quality of Williams' productions is decidedly improving at the Royal National Theatre. I recall the time, not so long ago, that in this company's production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, all of the characters spoke like Brooklyn mythical gangsters and their psychologies were equally distorted. None of that here. The fine English actress, Clare Higgins, plays Alexandra del Lago — the fading Hollywood superstar who is on the road with hashish and a hustler — after believing she failed in a comeback picture. Higgins is flawless in her American dialect and is totally believable in a role that has lured more than a few actresses over the top. Robert Knepper, the single American in the cast, has the perfect look and considerable skill to play the fading young gigolo, Chance Wayne. Wayne brings Ms. del Lago to his hometown on the Gulf Coast, supposedly for a rest, but in reality for him to see his childhood sweetheart, Heavenly Finley. A delight of the evening is seeing the remarkable Richard Pasco in top form, albeit in a fat suit, as Boss Finley. Finley, a corrupt Southern politician, learns Chance Wayne is in town. He plans to have him castrated for allegedly causing his daughter's hysterectomy. Williams, who was America's greatest poetic dramatist, could seldom curb his penchant to shock an audience. A plot, however, that seemed lurid in the fifties appears somewhat dated now.

In 1956 however, *Sweet Bird* spoke in lyric support of the Supreme Court's integration of the races. Boss Finley represented the kind of bigot who not only tyrannized the black man, but was a threat to the human rights of the entire populace. Williams was much more of a social dramatist than he has been properly credited. To illustrate his theme he chose in Alexandra and Chance, as he did frequently in his central characters, the fragile and the dispossessed — those beautiful outcasts he has called the Fugitive Kind. The sexual disintegration of these characters becomes Williams' analogy for the socio-political decline of the South: something is indeed rotten in the Delta.

While Williams' theme unfortunately still has relevance, the story, which no longer has shock appeal, appears at times like an overhyped soap opera. This production is not well served by director Richard Eyre, nor designer Anthony Ward, both of whom stress, rather than subdue, an already excessively baroque structure.

The actors at the Royal National are demonstrating that they now have a grasp on this American master. For a richer theatre experience, let's call in Declan Donneley, Sam Mendes or David Thacker to direct the neglected major plays of Williams. Any takers for *Summer and Smoke*, *Menagerie* or *Streetcar*?

David Storey's *Home* is an allegory of two elderly Edwardian gentlemen, dressed to the nines in a style appropriate when Empire reigned supreme, complete with gloves and walking stick. The play is set in a stark outside patio-like setting with a small table and two chairs. The two men talk amicably in non-sequiturs, fragmented exchanges that fail to communicate, but suggest a courageous struggle to embrace life with a touching, if antiquated, civility. Enter two women of their age, but not their class, with whom the men seem to have a slight acquaintance. The women speak in the same fragmented jargon, but in a much earthier tone. Considerable sexual innuendo is shared between the women, and one admonishes the other to "pull your skirt down" (although in this production it was never raised).

If all this sounds like an absurdist play, vaguely reminiscent of *Waiting for Godot*, you may be in the correct genre but proceed with caution. This play arrived on the London theatre scene in 1970 and was widely interpreted then as a statement of the decay of the British Empire. If you subscribe to that theory, Storey's comic ironies are a bit more grim. At first the gallant old Edwardians appear to be in a retirement home, or possibly a state nursing home, and then just possibly a home for the criminally deranged. All four major characters are possibly sex offenders. A fifth young man has had a labotomy. Certainly this makes the "fall of empire" reading uncommonly bleak.

The play is more compelling, I think, if one tunes in to its "sad, still music of humanity." Like *Godot*, it deals with the courage to go on when the sub-text is "I can't." The four elders all seem guilt-ridden, but each is in denial. A number of clues are given about the men's sexual transgressions, particularly as the women gossip about them. But is this valid evidence? We are, after all, likely in a mental home. I find these ambiguities fascinating. The fragility of the characters, blended with their determination to survive with dignity, is moving.

However, this production, to those of us fortunate enough to have seen the 1970 original, labors under a heavy onus. That occasion magically paired two of the greatest actors of the 20th century—Sir Ralph Richardson and Sir John Gielgud—and their charismatic connection made the production, for me, one of the most memorable in a lifetime of theatre going. To linger on that memory is palatably unfair to the two fine veteran actors currently playing the roles. Paul Eddington (Harry) and Richard Briers (Jack) play the text with moment-to-moment integrity, although Eddington has perhaps unconsciously slipped into the cadences of Gielgud. It is of interest that Gielgud and Richardson were offered the original British premier of *Waiting for Godot* and turned it down. They perhaps saw a second chance with this material.

The women in this production are delightful. Both Rowena Cooper (Kathleen) and Brenda Bruce (Marjorie) capture these capricious Cockneys with love. Jason Pitt is excellent as the lost young man who best communicates with inanimate objects and is fond of lifting chairs.

This is a solid production of a wonderful play by an important, currently neglected, British playwright that proves in this revival that it can speak afresh to a new generation.

One of the highlights of this best British theatre season in many years has to be Pierre Corneille's, *Le Cid* in the small Cortesloe house of the Royal National Theatre. This classic that, outside of French borders, has dozed in the classroom for three centuries, is now delighting audiences with its richness and, no doubt, baffling theatre practitioners as to why such an exciting text has not been more extensively produced in the English speaking theatre. The plot traces two noble lovers who are about to be wed when the woman's father insults and kills the young man's father, an elderly general. This propels the man, Don Rodrigo, to avenge his father, killing his lover's father in a duel. She, Ximena, then makes him her sworn enemy. Meanwhile, the Infanta, daughter of the King, secretly pines for Don Rodrigo. To make amends to his country and his beloved, Don Rodrigo goes into battle and is victorious in conquering the Moors, thus saving Spain; he is rechristened, *Le Cid*. The King intercedes in the lovers' separation. Through a trick he discovers that Ximena loves the Cid, decrees their marriage, and gives them a year to reconcile.

Add to the above plot summary the seeming implausibility of the neo-classic restrictions of singularity of time, place and action, and it perhaps sheds light on the limited number of productions of this classic. What audience would buy into this plot? In Britain and America the play has been more famous for the controversy surrounding it than for the text itself. What a mistake! In production, the brilliance of Corneille gives this story a driving compulsion. The characters are intriguing and the language, especially in Ranjit Bolt's new translation, is rich and full-bodied. Bolt, by the way, has put his verse into iambic pentameter, avoiding the French metric line. He backs up his choice quoting a couplet from English poet-critic, Alexander Pope:

A limping Alexandrine ends the Song  
like a wounded snake drags its slow length along.

Director Jonathan Kent has banished any wounded snakes from Spain and directed an exceedingly tight one-hour-forty-five-minute production without an interval. Perhaps the most singular strength of the production is that there is absolutely no question of credibility or concerns of coincidence. We are totally compelled to believe in this tragic-comedy.

Peter J. Davison's set design of gigantic ornate Baroque mirrors, topped by white horses, is arresting. The mirror frames are raked forward toward the audience; one is empty; the other is a magic mirror which can flash up images from the character's minds.

The performances are uniformly excellent. Director Kent has cast the production beautifully with skilled veterans Edward De Souza and Alan MacNaughtan as the fathers and Bernard Lloyd as the vain King.

Samantha Bond as the Infanta is remarkable in expressing her unrequited love for the Cid. Susan Lynch as Ximena and Duncan Bell as Don Rodrigo are excellent, particularly in their passionate interplay. There is a fascinating scene in which Rodrigo, wearing a shirt splattered with her father's blood approaches Ximena. "Now I've come to give you satisfaction," he says, ambiguously baring his chest, and it is clear Ximena doesn't know whether she wants to kill him or make love to him.

Kent's superb production perfectly captures Corneille's classic theme of the horrific human stakes when passion clashes with honor, and he states it in visceral theatrical terms.

The British 1994-95 season may well be remembered as the year of the rediscovery of Ibsen. While a best-forgotten production of *The Lady from the Sea* languished at the Lyric Hammersmith, the Royal Shakespeare Company in London offered a brilliant production of *Ghosts* and at Stratford they opened what may well become the definitive, *Peer Gynt*.

Veteran director John Barton, who staged the play in Norway, was persuaded to return to the R.S.C. to mount it. He totally captures the folk tale essence of this sprawling epic, with live music, songs, and direct address to the audience. He has further heightened his story-telling epic style by casting the mesmerizing Haydn Gwynne to play both Peer's mother Aase and his beloved, Solveig. Four excellent character actors play all the male roles, and five women, serving as a Greek chorus, alternatively become wedding guests, trolls, ship passengers, monkeys and the various other denizens of this fantastical script. It is a wonderful scheme of production—greatly heightened by the choice of the RSC's Swan Theatre. *Peer Gynt* is Ibsen's Shakespearean chronicle play, and it has always cried out for a non-localized Elizabethan stage where, in cinematic fashion, one scene may dissolve into the next. Who better than the R.S.C., under the direction of Barton, in the Swan, could make this happen? *Peer*, now unencumbered by illusionistic scenery that must be shifted with every change of locale, can fly; this tale that sometimes runs seven hours over two evenings can be told in a little over three. You leave the theatre, however, entirely unaware of the time passage.

The character of Peer, like the great protagonists in Shakespeare, requires an actor of tremendous strength, talent, and charisma. This production has it in Alex Jennings. This fine actor whose talents I first discovered some seasons ago in a brilliant comedic performance in, *Too Clever by Half*, here proves himself one of the most versatile of English actors. He plays both the young and mature Peer (the role is frequently split between two players), managing it with a tone constantly shifting between the comedy and tragic pathos Ibsen intended. It is a performance of gigantic vitality, always in the moment, as he makes lightning-fast transitions from his vivid fantasy images to the immediacies of his present dangers. Haydn Gwynne, in this subtle doubling of the women in Peer's life, gives a poignant and finely detailed performance. She is clearly a young actress to watch. Barton's insightful choice of a single actress as

Mother and sweetheart makes perfect sense, as their stabilizing love is the one constant in Peer's febrile life journey.

Director Barton's own adaptation, based on a text by Christopher Fry, with lyrics by Adrian Mitchell, packs in more of Peer's episodic search for himself than previous productions with which I am familiar. It even adds a scene between Peer, Solveig, and her father taken from Ibsen's original manuscript, never previously produced.

The first act offers us Peer as a young man, berated by his mother and townsfolk for his lying and laziness, who goes to a wedding feast where he meets his beloved Solveig. True to his feckless nature, he abducts the bride; quickly deserting her, he again meets Solveig, plans their future but is soon seen seducing the Troll King's daughter. The first act ends with a movingly-acted scene between Jennings and Gwynne as Mother Aase dies in Peer's arms.

It is really the second act journey of Peer, however, that moves this production toward brilliance. Now a wealthy slave trader, he is pushed from his ship by his guests, only to see it explode in the water. Convinced he is invincible, a series of inspired vignettes commence: Peer as Egyptologist in the desert, Peer in the madhouse, where an inmate quips one of the great epigrams of modern drama, "Absolute reason dropped dead at 11 o'clock." Returning to the sea, his next voyage ends in a storm, excitingly staged in the Swan. Peer and a sailor cling to a single rope. To save himself he pushes his hapless shipmate into the water to drown. In a near-concluding scene, we confront the play's central metaphor—Peer is peeling an onion in search of his true identity. The scene is simple, yet overpowering, literally as we smell and weep as Jennings passes out layers of the vegetable to front-row spectators to sample. We make the discovery together that the onion, like Peer, is without a core.

This is a primal, powerful, and vastly entertaining production of an Ibsen masterwork. Great credit must go to the acting company, director Barton, and his talented musical and design team.

These then are five fascinating evenings in the London and Stratford Theatre. Of the 33 productions I saw, 17 additional revivals were intriguing. Only five new works, however, were produced. One, an Australian tap dance musical, three plays by American authors, and two British. Of those, one was a hold-over, Stoppard's *Arcadia*, from the preceding season. One new British play for the summer season is a distinct disappointment, yet the quality and imagination of 22 major revivals will long linger in my memory.